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STAT

He's reluctant player in CIA theater

Robert Braunwart, 34, research editor at the University of Washington, U.S. citizen, Seattle resident, Democrat.

Subversive? Commie agent? Threat to national security?

Or is he merely an unwitting CIA patsy whose good name got caught up in some mock-Hitchcockian spy-hunting charade?

Well, the FBI thinks so. And if he is, how many more Robert Braunwarts have files cluttering up the microfilm banks at CIA "Company" headquarters? Have you got one, too?

Let's say it's the early '60s, and you're Robert Braunwart, a Moses Lake High School student destined to get a bachelor's degree in political science from the University of Washington.

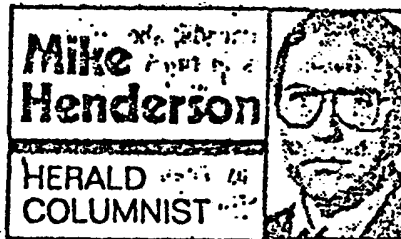
Let's say you're a little bit interested in the politics and cultural trappings of foreign countries, and Life magazine and the local paper aren't exactly providing the broadest possible windows on the world.

Let's say you decide to write directly to foreign capitals — to Canberra, London, Tokyo, for example, or Peking or Moscow or Belgrade or Havana. And let's say some of these capitals start sending you information, some of which the FBI maintains 20 years later has been intercepted and pored over by operatives of the CIA.

Let's say it makes you mad enough to file for access to your alleged CIA dossier under the Freedom of Information Act, and let's say the CIA won't hand over the purported file unless forced by court order to do so.

If you're Robert Braunwart, it makes you mad enough to put up the 60 bucks it costs to sue the CIA.

Hence, United States District Court case 82-345, stamped March 26, 1982:



Robert Braunwart vs. Central Intelligence Agency, in which one man grabs for the long arm of a government agency allegedly reaching past its jurisdiction — all the way to Moses Lake, Wash.

"I wrote to half the independent countries in the world," Braunwart was saying the other day on the eve of the anniversary of his first dead-ended correspondence from the CIA.

"I'd been interested in political science and history and languages all along. I would like to emphasize that these are not the only countries I got information from, but I got information from the Soviet Union and China and North Korea and basically all the Balkan countries. And Cuba."

He says he mostly received literature about the politics and history of said countries. He got some children's books and picture books, too. Some of the information was about languages, which Braunwart says was useful seeing as how he was learning Russian and trying to learn Chinese.

Any CIA op with a dog-eared spy novel in his drawer would have to figure Robert Braunwart, a teenager from Moses Lake with a wad of postage stamps at his disposal, had "subversive" written all over him. Braunwart believes the CIA peeked at his mail.

"A number of years ago there were

some newspaper reports that the CIA had been doing that routinely," Braunwart says. "At the time, since I knew that not all my mail had gotten through both ways, I thought that perhaps it was the U.S. and not the foreign governments that were taking it. "So it's been a number of years that I thought there was a possibility of that."

"I decided in principle years ago to check into it, but it wasn't any real crucial thing. So I didn't get around to doing it until December 1980."

"The FBI said the only thing they had on me was a request by the CIA to check up and see if I was a subversive. The FBI did that, and decided I wasn't."

He says the FBI sent him a report of its investigation, but without the CIA request that prompted the inquiry to begin with.

His claim, then, is that the CIA kept a dossier on him but won't admit it and wouldn't release it if it did.

Steve Strong, Braunwart's attorney in Seattle, theorizes that the agency is stalling for time.

"It's embarrassing for them to have to admit that they read his mail," Strong says, allowing as how the CIA also may be counting on an amendment to the Freedom of Information Act presently being mulled in Washington.

One would think that the CIA would find the final section of Braunwart's complaint to be embarrassing. In it, the plaintiff requests "a finding that circumstances surrounding the withholding raise questions whether CIA personnel may have acted arbitrarily or capriciously."

Strong notes that the agency probably is encouraged by an executive order issued 10 days ago making it easier to classify information.

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